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Possible CIA link to contra flight worries members of Senate panel

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WASHINGTON — After a session with CIA Director William J. Casey, leaders of the Senate Intelligence Committee yesterday expressed nervousness about a possible agency role in efforts to resupply Nicaragua's contra rebels.

"The administration has got a real credibility problem on this one," and is "skating on a thin icebed," said committee Vice Chairman Patrick J. Leahy (D., Vt.). "A lot of questions have been raised, and I don't have the answers."

Sen. Dave Durenberger (R., Minn.), the committee's chairman, sounded puzzled and uncertain when asked who was behind the resupply mission exposed Sunday

when a U.S.-based C-123 aircraft was downed in Nicaragua by Sandinista troops using a Soviet surface-to-air missile.

"Somebody in the U.S. government knows who they are and has encouraged them," Durenberger said in discussing those behind the mission. He pronounced himself "fairly confident" that the CIA "has been trying to keep its hands clean" until congressional conferees agree on terms for the release of \$100 million in contra aid won from Congress by the administration.

Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams, meanwhile, insisted that statements by the C-123's surviving crewman implicating the CIA were falsehoods coerced by Sandinista threats and duress.

"I'm confident they [the Sandinistas] are telling him, 'If you say the things we want to hear, you'll be out in no time,'" Abrams told the Associated Press.

Abrams' comments came after the detained American, Eugene Hasenfus, 45, said in a radio interview broadcast in Nicaragua that 24 to 26 employees of "the company," meaning the CIA, had supplied, maintained and provided fuel and housing for his operation.

Retired Army Maj. Gen. John K. Singlaub, head of the World Anti-Communist League and the U.S. Council for World Freedom, and a leading fund-raiser for the contras, also dismissed Hasenfus' assertions as "probably false."

Singlaub also denied any involvement in, or knowledge of, the C-123 mission. On Wednesday, a New York Times article quoted unidentified government sources linking him to the mission.

Singlaub said he was "convinced" after speaking with officials in "the highest levels of the agency" that the CIA was not involved. He added that it was "possible" that the agency had remained several steps removed from the effort while giving it a tacit blessing.

Hasenfus, 45, of Marinette, Wis., might have believed that he was working for the CIA, Singlaub theorized, "and his charter company may have told him that," because such employers "find they get a higher quality individual if they believe they're working for the government, rather than strictly for money."

The FBI and the Senate Intelligence Committee both are seeking to determine whether the resupply effort violated the Neutrality Act or any other U.S. statutes against American involvement in foreign wars.

"The mere fact that an aircraft was taking off down there ... would not constitute a violation of the Neutrality Act," said Justice Department spokesman John Russell.

"It's questionable whether parachuting weapons and boots into Nicaragua would violate the Neutrality Act in itself. It has to come from the United States, and that's what the preliminary inquiry is about."

In Miami, FBI spokesman Paul Miller confirmed that agents had begun a probe of Southern Air Transport, which Nicaragua charged operated the downed plane.

Aviation industry sources at Miami International Airport, Southern Air's base, said the downed C-123 frequently had been seen at Southern Air's facilities, along with a second C-123 that also often flew Central American routes.